International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 2012, Volume 24, Number 3, 376-382
http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/ ISSN 1812-9129

A Checklist to Guide Graduate Students' Writing

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Many graduate students are poor writers because graduate school demands higher quality and more variety of writing skills than undergraduate school, most students write without revision under heavy time pressures, and instructors often lack the time to guide them toward good writing. Helping students improve could happen in different ways. A structured modeling process might help, but it would be time intensive for faculty and students. Peer review writing groups might help students improve their writing, but they would require extensive student time as well as giving and receiving feedback, a process with which they may be uncomfortable. A process that might balance time and effort for all involved is a checklist for mechanical errors. Some existing checklists are brief but limited in scope; others are comprehensive but time consuming. The present manuscript presents an intermediate length checklist for mechanical errors. It has the advantages of encouraging interaction between faculty and student, having flexibility to be adapted to particular needs, and focusing on mechanical errors thus freeing up faculty to focus on substantive issues such as content and organization.

Perhaps you have been less than satisfied at times, as have we, with the process as well as the outcome of providing guidance for graduate students' writing of scholarly papers. For example, we have struggled with such issues as the reality that some of our students do not have the prerequisite writing skills that we expected them to have at the graduate level. We have also struggled to find enough time for providing effective feedback, and have been at times frustrated when students, before submitting a paper to us, neither thoroughly edit their own work nor have another person read and review their work. The purpose of this paper, then, is to share our efforts to find a more effective and efficient way to guide writing. We searched the literature, first to further understand the nature of graduate students' problems with writing, and second to determine available methods used to improve writing. Although we identified checklists as one such method, the existing ones were poorly suited to our students' needs. Therefore, we used what we had learned from the literature, coupled with our own experience, to develop a writing checklist to use as one tool in guiding our graduate students' writing.

Problems with Writing at the Graduate Level

Writing is essential for success as a graduate student, yet many students enter graduate school unable to express themselves well in writing (Alter & Adkins, 2001). Graduate students' poor writing may well be a carryover of their undergraduate weakness. In a 2005 U.S. survey, only 11% of college seniors were proficient writers (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007). This lack of proficiency in writing contrasts with faculty expectations: faculty members expect that their undergraduate students have mastered basic writing skills, faculty expectations which are often unmet (Collier & Morgan, 2008). It is unlikely that students who finish their undergraduate degrees and go on to graduate school increased their writing skill in the interim. Thus it is not surprising that the majority of graduate students are weak in scholarly writing (Cafferella & Barnett, 2000; Harris, 2006).

Writing projects in graduate school are inescapable, and the types of writing tasks expand compared to the relatively simple tasks of reporting and summarizing that are common undergraduate assignments. In fact, research on graduate writing revealed 11 unique types of writing assignments that graduate students are expected to master: research papers, experimental/observational reports with interpretation, article and book reviews, abstracts or summaries of others' writings, case studies, plans and proposals, short essays, documented computer programs, journal articles, annotated bibliographies, and miscellaneous short (i.e., less than half a page) writing tasks (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007).

In addition to increased types of writing, graduate students must also deal with increased demands with respect to revising their writing. Previously they may have had a history of simply turning in a paper, waiting, and then receiving a grade. This one-round process means that they are unfamiliar with the fact that good writing requires multiple revisions (Cheshire, 1989). Thus, it is often an uncomfortable shock to graduate students to realize that they must revise writing that was formerly acceptable, and perhaps even exceptional.

Adding to the mismatch between faculty expectations and students' skills and experience is the pressure of proper time management. Most graduate students have responsibilities that compete with their studies for their limited time and attention (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007). Work commitments, financial independence, family obligations, and lack of parental or spousal support are consistent barriers for adult students (Seurkamp, 2007). When surveyed, many graduate students indicated that they were simply too busy to revise, and typically began writing assignments

with no expectation of revising (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). Admittedly, addressing writing quality requires a significant commitment of time: seasoned writers report that 40-50% of their total writing time is devoted to revision (Scott, 2001).

Further compounding writing problems of graduate students is a lack of meaningful faculty feedback. For example, cursory feedback accompanying a grade is less effective than exercises in which students identify and correct errors (Quible & Griffin, 2007). However, faculty members typically offer very little support or direct instruction in how to write for an academic audience or for possible publication (Mullen, 2001). Both students and faculty apparently assume that undergraduate writing skills will evolve to produce graduate-level writing (Harris, 2006). Unfortunately, this goal is usually unrealized, and many students who initially produce good undergraduate term papers will be unable to meet the increased demands of graduate-level scholarly writing (Harris, 2006; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). In view of the complications of high quality demands on writing, a poor history of learning how to write, severe time constraints, and lack of sufficient instruction in how to write, it is not surprising that few graduate students can produce high quality, publishable writing.

Available Methods to Improve Graduate Students' Writing

How can willing but practical faculty members implement a structured learning process to improve the writing skills of their graduate students? Our review of the literature provided several answers to that question, including strategies that use instructor and peer modeling and feedback, as well as those that focus on mechanical errors by using checklists.

Instructor Modeling and Peer Review

One approach is for professors to model for students how to evaluate assignment requirements and parameters, to show students how to plan and engage in prewriting, and, perhaps most importantly, to teach students how to edit and revise their writing (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). Optimally, this approach might be best implemented by creating a discipline-specific advanced composition course, whether at the undergraduate level as some experts recommend (Richardson, 2008), or at the graduate level. Alternately, graduate programs might embed intensive writing instruction within a designated required course (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011). Individual faculty members could also design writing instruction components within their own courses to improve the nature of the feedback they provide to graduate students and to create an environment that embraces revision. This faculty review approach has the strength of providing high-level feedback, but the limitation of requiring extensive faculty time and effort.

Another approach that might help students improve their writing is peer-review groups. One successful peer-review group required students to write feedback on draft manuscripts on their own time and return these comments to the authors at the start of a meeting (Page-Adams, Cheng, Gogineni, & Shen, 1995). This format was particularly helpful, at least in part because participants could use the bulk of meeting time for critical analysis and conceptualization of substantive content rather than basic editorial suggestions and corrections of mechanical errors. Another example of peer-review groups utilized email communication among group members in addition to individual writing and in-person group meetings (Lassig et al., 2009). The doctoral student participants reported that the peer-review group experience provided opportunities to write individually and with peers, motivation to write, confidence in their writing, and support from peers. Perhaps most importantly, these students also said that they believed the peer-review group experience helped them improve their writing skills.

A challenge with peer review is that graduate students must balance potentially even more school, work, and family responsibilities than in undergraduate school, so may find it difficult to find time for peer group meetings (Lassig et al., 2009). Another challenge in forming peer writing groups is that reviewing does not come naturally (Haaga, 1993). Students who are already unsure of their own writing abilities are even less sure of their ability to provide meaningful feedback to their peers. Further, like the dearth of training to improve writing, there is also little training for students in how to review their own work and others' work. Often, students' writing anxiety exacerbates doubt over whether they can provide useful commentary for their peers. They often feel disappointed and frustrated by the quality of feedback they receive from peers (Cafferella & Barnett, 2000; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). Although there is some literature on teaching students how to negotiate the professional journal review process (Seals & Tanaka, 2000), there is no attempt to connect the process to their graduate writing tasks. Thus, student peer review has the advantage of requiring little or no faculty time, but may be difficult to implement and may provide a lower caliber of feedback than does faculty review.

Mechanics and Checklists

Another approach that might help students improve their writing is focusing on mechanical errors. Mechanical errors may be easy to tackle for two

reasons. First, they are prevalent. As beginning graduate writers struggle to meet their instructors' high expectations, as well as their own unrealistic expectations of literary greatness, they frequently drown their own meaningful content in a disorganized fog of jargon, fragmented concepts, and unsupported opinions (Harris, 2006). Indeed, graduate students often become so involved with content that they forget about mechanics. Second, mechanical errors tend to be more straightforward and clearly defined than those related to content and organization. Thus, students may find giving and receiving corrections for mechanical aspects of writing easier than for content and organization. In the peer review process, students may then be relatively comfortable with receiving corrections and identifying mechanical errors (Haaga, 1993).

A checklist might be particularly suitable for helping students with mechanical errors because it can provide a concrete reminder of possible errors and concerns for examination and revision, and at the same time sidestep the emotionality students bring to their writing (Cafferella & Barnett, 2000). Also, a checklist neatly solves the problems of faculty time for feedback, student initiation of writing groups and ability to give quality feedback, and student comfort with peer review. Numerous checklists are available for students at all levels from elementary school to graduate school and beyond. They vary in length from quite brief (e.g., less than one page) to quite comprehensive (e.g., 13 pages), in the audience for which they are designed, and in the degree of interaction with others that they entail. Some of the available checklists could be useful for graduate students.

One brief checklist, the Revision and Editing Checklist (Texas A&M Writing Center, 2009), has three parts. The first part contains 13 items (e.g., "Have I used a dictionary to double check any unfamiliar words I have used?"), which would be relevant to many different areas. The second part is a follow-up self-editing checklist, providing helpful guidelines to identify most common mistakes and to identify suspected errors. The third part is a follow-up proofreading checklist identifying punctuation, usage, and common citation and formatting errors. This part offers a signature line and is designed to be stapled to the front of the paper. Another brief checklist, the Armstrong Atlantic State University Writing Center's (2009) checklist, contains 22 broad overview items (e.g., "Write a rough draft") and refers users to Georgia's virtual library system. A third brief checklist, the Editing and Proofreading Checklist (George Mason University Writing Center, 2009), is designed for literature majors but contains helpful suggestions such as minimizing passive voice, checking pronoun antecedents, and checking transitions. These brief checklists have an advantage in that busy graduate students and professors may be more likely to use brief rather than lengthy checklists. However, that same brevity can also be a disadvantage in that it restricts content.

Lengthy checklists have been developed that address a more comprehensive range of writing issues. One such checklist is the Writing Guidelines for Graduate Papers (Jackson, 1999), which within its 13 pages contains excellent strategies for a variety of problems from writer's block to balancing the discussion. The accompanying Edit Checklist is 27 items, some of which (e.g., "applied appropriate persuasion strategies") would be inappropriate for many education and psychology papers. Another example of a lengthy checklist is Twelve Common Errors: An Editing Checklist (University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center, 2009), which at 19 pages might be classified as an essay rather than a checklist. Nonetheless, it has excellent examples such as avoiding phrases like "a lot" and contractions in formal writing and using passive voice carefully. In addition, an electronically available checklist for law school papers is eight pages and is oriented to law school articles (http://ssrn.com/abstract=1130308). Lengthy checklists such as these provide examples and detailed information, but might be overwhelming for busy students and faculty.

Intermediate length checklists exist as well, and bridge the gap between comprehensiveness and ease of use. The 36-item Editing Checklist (Downey, Mort, & Collinson, 2009) has the unique asset of suggesting checking for non-discriminatory language. Writing Papers: A Checklist (Kremer, 2009), which is designed for economists but might also be helpful to education and psychology, notes that the guidelines are not ironclad. Re-Writing – Editing and Revising (Higher Education Development Centre, 2009) provides sections on organization and content, cohesion, vocabulary and grammar, and mechanical details (e.g., "Are headings in a consistent style?").

Overall, existing checklists vary widely in length and in the field of study. Although many checklists recommend having a peer or colleague read the writing, none recommends written feedback from that reader. Further, existing checklists require no evidence from students that they obtained prior written feedback, or that they carefully completed the checklist. One exception, the Revision and Editing Checklist (Texas A&M Writing Center, 2009) includes a signature line and requires that the checklist be stapled to the front of the paper. That checklist, then, might serve as a starting point for discussion between the graduate student and the professor. However, such interaction does not appear to be an inherent feature of the majority of existing writing checklists.

Development of the Present Checklist

Given our review of methods to improve graduate students' writing, we determined that for our purposes a

checklist was the most practical of available methods. An important advantage was that we, as individual faculty members, could implement use of a checklist immediately. We do not underestimate the possible impact of more broadly based approaches such as incorporation of more intensive writing instruction into the content of existing courses or the creation of a discipline-specific advanced composition course. These approaches, however, would entail the lengthy departmental and university approval process required for programmatic changes, as well as significant amounts of faculty time and effort to implement.

Once we had selected the checklist method, we clarified the purposes we intended the checklist to serve. The first purpose was to supplement rather than replace oral and written feedback. We envisioned our checklist, in contrast to those already available, for use as an interactive teaching tool. Thus, we expected that the professor would review the checklist with the student before the first draft, providing examples as necessary. So, we did not expect that every item on the checklist be necessarily self-explanatory. For example, we would explain that the item indicating that most paragraphs and sentences should be of "roughly equal length" was included because we believe that following this guideline results in manuscripts with good flow, and that unusually short paragraphs and sentences are better reserved for when the writer wants to provide unusual emphasis. We would also explain that the requirement that "[a]n outline of all headings is attached" makes it easier for the student and the professor to check for overall organization and for consistent and correct use of headings. Because we did not expect the checklist to be self-explanatory, we were able to keep it to only one page in length. We believed that the short length added to practicality, especially inasmuch as we would expect students to complete the checklist for every draft.

A second purpose was to increase our students' use of self-monitoring and peer-editing and to hold them accountable for so doing. The final two sections of the checklist, Final Steps and Statements of Personal Commitment, contain items to that end (see Appendix). We have had the frustrating experience of providing feedback for a draft of a student paper, only to read in a subsequent draft the same errors we had previously corrected. Indeed, after receiving feedback, some students tweak but do not internalize their errors or mature as writers. Therefore, we required students to include all prior drafts of the paper, and to indicate that they had addressed all previous feedback. To ensure that our students actually followed our oft-stated advice to have someone else read the paper before it is submitted to us, we required students to obtain and actually attach written peer feedback. Finally, we designed the checklist as a contract, requiring the student to sign and date the following statement: "I have carefully reviewed my paper and have accurately completed every checklist item. I understand that my professor will return this draft without reading it unless I have done so."

Once we had clarified the major purposes for our checklist, our next step was to delimit the scope and the intended audience. With respect to scope, we decided to focus primarily on stylistic concerns in general and the mechanics of scholarly writing in particular. In the past, we had found that grammar, stylistic, mechanical errors in students' writing too often obscured content so much that our verbal feedback disproportionately addressed mechanical and stylistic concerns rather than clarity of message, thoughtful critique of the literature, new insights, or synthesis. Mechanical errors took so much conferencing time that little time was left to confer about more important issues such as organization and content. Therefore, we envisioned the written checklist as a more efficient vehicle than in-person discussion for the first layer of feedback, that is, to address stylistic concerns. Using the checklist would free up limited conference time, whether in-person or electronic, for more substantive issues. Although we decided to reserve conference time for these larger issues, it is important to note that some of the available checklists described in an earlier section did in fact incorporate items addressing higher-order thinking. In our case, however, our decision was to focus more narrowly on the mechanical aspects of writing. In order to both provide the amount of detail relative to mechanics needed by our students as well as to keep the checklist to the short length we believed was more practical, we decided that our checklist would not explicitly address higher-order thinking.

In addition to narrowing the scope of the proposed checklist, we also delimited the intended audience. Given our review of existing checklists, it was apparent to us that no one checklist could be appropriate for graduate students in any field or for any type of writing. Thus, we determined that the present checklist would be for students in the fields of education and psychology who are turning in a draft of an article, a dissertation, a thesis, or a term paper. Further, since variation in expectations would still exist within that narrowed use, we designed this checklist as a flexible tool to be modified according to the demands of the specific writing project and to the needs of the individual student and professor. For example, the checklist includes blanks for the professor to complete regarding appropriate length (e.g., "Body is ___ pages") and number of references (e.g., "Reference list includes ___ sources"; see Appendix).

Once we had clarified our purposes and delimited the scope of the checklist, we listed frequent mechanical errors observed in students' writing. We

discussed our list with other faculty, revised it based on their informal feedback, and reformatted our list into a checklist with boxes for each item (see Appendix). Next, we gave the checklist to several graduate students and asked for their feedback regarding the clarity of the format and wording, suggestions for additions or deletions, and the degree to which they believed the checklist would be useful and facilitate productive face-to-face conferences. Based on their feedback, we made final revisions to the checklist and began using it with our graduate students.

Conclusion

Although we have just begun using this checklist, initial feedback indicates that it will be useful as we continue our efforts to better provide guidance for graduate students' writing. Graduate students have commented favorably on its usefulness, such as, "I wish I'd had this when I began my program." From the beginning, we envisioned this checklist as a dynamic tool to be changed by individual faculty members as needed according to the needs of individual students and according to the demands of specific writing tasks. We also envisioned the checklist to be changed according to students' suggestions. For example, the above comment from a student prompted us to make the checklist available to students at the beginning of their programs.

We believe that flexibility in the formatting and use of the checklist is an advantage. To that end, instructors in other disciplines might use our checklist as a template to be modified to better address the writing projects assigned to their own students. However, we also acknowledge that flexibility can be a limitation in that collecting empirical evidence for checklist effectiveness would typically require the use of a single version of the checklist. Inasmuch as we have only recently begun to implement the checklist with our graduate students, using the checklist as a static rather than dynamic document seems premature at this point.

In sum, our initial experiences using this checklist have been positive, yet we do expect that we will continue to refine both the format and manner of use. Though we did not expect nor intend it to be best used as an end in itself, we are finding the checklist to be an effective departure point for the ongoing dialog that we believe is essential to the process of guiding graduate students' scholarly writing.

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Appendix
Checklist for Graduate Student Papers

Overall Organization
___Title < 15 words
___At least 2 headings if paper over 20 pages
___At least 2 paragraphs per heading

Introduction
___Builds case for importance of/need for paper
___Foreshadows paper organization (e.g., explicitly mentions all major sections)
___Closes with explicit statement of purpose

Body & Reference List
___Every section introduced and summarized
___Every point fully developed, clearly explained
___Every hypothesis tested
___Every paragraph has introductory and summary sentences
___All paragraphs at least two or more sentences, but less than one page in length
___Most paragraphs roughly equal length
___ Most sentences roughly equal length
___References every statement of fact
___No secondary sources
___Few direct quotes; all have quotation marks and page numbers
___Few authors or sources outside parentheses
___Most in-text citations at end, not middle, of sentences
___Few cites of a source more than once in the same paragraph
___ Body is appropriate length (___ pages) [professor fills in blank]

Conclusion
___Summarizes major points
___Includes limitations
___Gives recommendations and/or implications

Mechanics/APA
___Uses 1" margins, 12-point Times New Roman font
___Numbers pages
___Abstract includes at least one sentence from introduction, method, results, and discussion
___Uses *et al.* correctly
___Each comparative (e.g., “most,” “better”) explicitly names comparison (e.g., “than”, “compared to,”)
___Uses (a), (b), etc. rather than (1), (2), etc., for lists within sentences

Final Steps
___Peer/colleague has read the manuscript critically and has given written feedback, and that written feedback is attached
___All prior drafts edited by my professor are attached
___All feedback has been addressed (changes made, explanation if not)
___All Microsoft Word red and green underlines checked
___References checked for accuracy against reference list
___An outline of all headings is attached
___This draft is saved as a file labeled with date/title, my name/phone
___Reference list includes appropriate # of sources _____ [professor fills in blank]

Statement of Personal Commitment

I have carefully reviewed my paper and completed every checklist item. (I understand that my professor will return this draft without reading it unless I have done so.)

I understand what constitutes plagiarism and the university policy regarding plagiarism. I attest that the submitted document is my own work.

Signed:_____ Date:_____